DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 455 492 CS 014 412

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TITLE	Reading in the Middle School.
PUB DATE	2001-00-00
NOTE	8p.
PUB TYPE	Opinion Papers (120)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Classroom Techniques; Middle Schools; *Reading Achievement; *Reading Comprehension; *Reading Instruction; Student Needs; Teacher Role; *Word Recognition
IDENTIFIERS	Response to Literature

ABSTRACT

The middle school reading/literature instructor needs to determine where each student is in reading achievement and then assist each to achieve as optimally as possible. What might the teacher do to assist students to become good middle school readers? A major problem of middle schoolers is to be able to recognize a certain percent of words correctly for adequate comprehension to take place. Some of the ways to assist students in word recognition are: (1) use of context clues; (2) phonics; (3) picture clues; and (4) syllabication skills. Teachers should identify possible unknown words for students to master prior to their reading a selection. After students have read the selection silently, they need to discuss the contents with teacher guidance to rehearse content read as well as answer previously identified questions. Students should: understand what has been read; use what has been acquired within a new situation; analyze content read; integrate subject matter achieved; and assess the worth of subject matter read. Narrative literature may be divided into component parts such as students attaching meaning to: the setting of the story; characterization; the plot; the theme; point of view; and irony. Student achievement can be assessed in the reading of each library book in one of several ways, and the quality of the evaluation may be assessed on a 5-point scale with the use of a rubric. Students may prefer to work in individualized reading or within a group setting in cooperative endeavors in the literature curriculum. (NKA)

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Reading in the Middle School.

by Marlow Ediger

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READING IN THE MIDDLE SCHOOL

Students on the middle school level do vary considerably in reading achievement. Thus, the reading teacher needs to provide for students who vary from each other in reading progress. No two students are alike in interests, abilities, and attainment. The middle school reading and literature instructor needs to determine where each student is presently in reading achievement and then assist each to achieve as optimally as possible. This is no easy task, but the literacy instructor needs to do the very best possible. What might the teacher do to assist students to be come good middle school readers?

Word Identification Problems

One problem which still hinders learners from becoming proficient readers is the lack of ability to recognize selected words. Many educators, of course, argue, that students should have mastered word recognition skills on the primary grades. This certainly would be an ideal, but there are middle school students who do not do well in several academic areas due to having difficulties in identifying unknown words in print. As a reading and literature instructor, he/she needs to use selected flexible yard sticks to notice how well students do in word recognition. At the beginning of the school year, the teacher should listen to pupils individually reading a selection sequentially aloud in class. He/she should notice if a student identifies approximately 85 to 90% of the running words correctly. If this is not the case, comprehension will tend to go downhill. Students do need to recognize an adequate number of words correctly to understand ideas being read. A major problem of middle schoolers then is to be able to recognize a certain percent of words correctly for adequate comprehension to take place. What are some ways to assist students in word recognition?

1. use of context clues. If a middle school student does not recognize a word, he/she should attempt, first of all to identify it. The student should be given help to notice what the unknown word might be. Thus, attempts need to be made to ascertain which word would fit in in terms of context. The supplied word by the reader must fit in with the rest of the words in the sentence. Sometimes, a student will provide an outlandish word which could not possibly relate to the other words in the sentence. The student then should be guided to supply a word which does make sense within the sentence (Ediger, 1979, 12-13).

2. phonics. Phonics skills may come in handy for the reader, along with the use of context clues, to identify the unknown word. Thus if a student cannot identify the unknown word through use of context clues, the teacher may assist the student to sound out the first letter in the unknown word. Generally, most middle schoolers can identify that first

letter by associating sounds with symbols. Thus for many, the use of context clues together with phonics, the learner can identify the unknown word. This, however, must be taught.

If the student still cannot recognize a word, it should be pronounced aloud by the teacher or a peer. Never should the unknown word be immediately pronounced aloud to students which they are reading silently. Rather, assistance needs to be given to help the middle schooler become independent in reading through the use of context clues and phonics. Additional learnings in phonics may need to be in the offing, such as the reader noticing ending letters of an unknown word and/or medial vowel letters and sounds.

3. picture clues. Textbooks and other literary books may not have enough pictures on sequential pages to provide help in recognizing unknown words. For example on the early primary grade level, the child may not be able to identify a word, but can do so with the aid of an illustration on the page being read. Middle schoolers should use the illustrations on each page being read to secure background information in reading subject matter.Background information secured should assist students to comprehend contents better than not using the illustrations in the page being read or for the entire reading selection.

4. syllabication skills. Syllabication skills developed by the middle school student should guide to unlock unknown words. If a student does not recognize a word, he/she may divide the unknown into syllables. For example, the learner may not recognize the word "irreparable," he/she may separate the prefix "ir" from "reparable" and recognize what appeared to be the unknown. The word "irreparable" looks long and lengthy until the initial prefix "ir" is separated. The student may also know the word prefix "ir" when being considered separately. Then, after putting the two knowns together the learner recognizes the somewhat lengthy word (Ediger, 2000, Chapter Sixteen).

All middle school reading teachers need to identify possible unknown words for students to master prior to their reading a given selection. These possible new words for learners to identify may be printed in neat manuscript letters on the chalk board or typed into a word processor. The teacher needs to go over these words with middle school students until they can be identified readily. He/she may point to each word and pronounce it correctly followed by individual students using correct pronunciation to also recognize each word. It is good also to have students understand the meaning of each word as it will be used in context within the literary selection to be read. In addition, the teacher may discuss the illustrations directly related to the reading selection in order to develop background information within students to increase reading comprehension. By this time, students will have identified questions which they wish to have answered.The textbook may provide

the necessary answers when reading silently. The teacher may write additional questions on the chalkboard for students to find needed information when reading from the literary selection. These questions provide purposes for reading (Ediger, 1996-1997, 18-23).

After students have read the literary selection silently, they need to discuss the contents with teacher guidance to rehearse content read as well as answer previously identified questions. Within the framework of comprehension, students need to not only recall vital facts, but also move on to higher levels of thinking. These levels include

1. understanding what has been read. The learner then is able to say in his/her own words that which has been read.
2. use what has been acquired within a new situation.
3. analyze content read. Here, the students separates facts from opinions, fantasy from reality, and the salient from the irrelevant.
4. integrate subject matter achieved. Thus the student can put together what has been analyzed into a larger whole of related ideas to form concepts generalizations, and main ideas.
5. assess the worth of subject matter read. The content may be placed into a category of having much value or it might also have lesser values than other content read. The student here should be able to make a judgment on the worth of content read (Ediger, 2000, 59-68).

There are advocates of students to do more reading in the area of expository content as compared to the narrative. Expository content emphasizes subject matter from different academic disciplines such as history, geography, the sciences,and mathematics, whereas narrative content stresses literature aspects of reading which are based more on the feeling dimensions of human encounter. The chances are that expository reading builds background information more so than does narrative literature. Background information is highly important for student reading in that what is known will assist much in understanding new subject matter encountered. The author, however, feels that there needs to be a balance between the expository and the narrative content for middle school students (See Pyszkowski, 1993, 151-157).

Ingredients in a Quality Narrative Literature Curriculum

To analyze narrative reading in the literature curriculum, the student should ultimately be able to understand selected vital facets. Thus, narrative literature may be divided into component parts such as students attaching meaning to

1. the setting of the story. Here, students need to understand the details of where the incidents in the story took place. The immediate total environment needs comprehension. It makes much difference in story content if the setting was in a rural area as compared to a suburban or

urban place. The season of the year also has much to do with a person's feelings and attitudes.

2. characterization. Characters in the story may vary much, of course, from story to story. The main character or characters are important for students to understand in terms of motives, the affective dimension, income levels, and age, among others. A character may change in age and maturity in a narrative or he/she may stay the same in these two categories throughout the story.

3. the plot. Of utmost importance when relating the setting and characterization to the plot is to ask the question, "What happened ultimately in the story?"

4. the theme. Middle schoolers need to read the narrative in terms of attaching meaning to the underlying message the writer is attempting to tell. Writers have definite feelings and specific beliefs to present pertaining to life's situations to readers. The theme then attempts to convey to readers certain values which the writer feels are salient to emphasize.

5. point of view. Readers here must attach meaning to who is telling the story. It might be an animal, a person, an object, and/or a combination of these three, either singularly or collectively.

6. irony. Writers do attempt to bring in irony into selected writings. Very frequently, individuals in society say, for example, that it is ironic that the minister bilked his/her church out of money. Or, the judge who was so strict in court cases and sentences meted out for crimes committed by individuals who abused others, now finds himself/herself being charged with abuse. Irony seems to be common in everyday experiences in the societal arena (Ediger, 2001, ERIC# CG030967).

Individualized Reading for Middle School Students

The literature/reading teacher needs to have a wide variety of books available to students so that each may choose a library book to read. Narrative, expository, and creative reading materials then need to be in the offing. Books here need to be on a a variety of reading levels so that each learner may choose that which is on his/her unique reading level. Learners tend to avoid selecting books to read individually which are too difficult. Nor do they wish to read books which lack challenge. These library books need to possess a wide variety of genre so that the student may read a book on topics which are of great interest. If a learner cannot settle down to read a library book, the middle school teacher may choose that which might be of benefit to the reader. Otherwise, choices made should be up to the student. The goal is to get students to read sequential library books.

How should student achievement be assessed from the reading of each library book? Students individually nay make this choice. One of

the following procedures of assessment may then be chosen to evaluate the quality of achievement in comprehension (See Ediger, 1995, 33-34):

1. having a conference with the teacher to evaluate how well the learner understood the contents in the book read. Thus, the teacher may ask selected questions of the learner to check comprehension. The learner may also read aloud a short selection to check word recognition skills.
2. drawing a series of illustrations to indicate the setting, characterization, or plot of the story.
3. pantomiming selected scenes from the library book read.
4. developing a mural to reveal comprehension.
5. construction an object to indicate reading achievement.

The quality of the evaluation may be assessed on a five point scale with the use of a rubric. Multiple Intelligences Theory states that students possess diverse intelligences and each student's favorite way of learning may be used to reveal content acquired (See Gardner, 1993).

Cooperative Learning in the Literature Curriculum

With learning styles theory (Searson and Dunn, 2001), students have preferred ways of learning. They may prefer to work by the self as in individualized reading or students may prefer to work within a group settling. Assisting each other in reading library books and sharing of ideas read provide a wonderful opportunity for student learning and achievement. There are standards which learners need to follow carefully for cooperative learning to succeed. Cooperative endeavors stress using group or interpersonal learning. Within a group, students need to

1. work together and respect each other.
2. accept the ideas of others without ridiculing or being rude.
3. have ideas circulate within the group so that each student has a chance to share content read.
4. work out disagreements in a polite way with the goal being to accommodate each in a democratic way.
5. assess the quality of the group in becoming better readers and comprehending content in meaningful ways.

For those desiring to work in cooperative endeavors in the literature curriculum, there are definite benefits which should accrue. Among others, these are the following when multiple copies are available for reading a single library book:

1. a student receiving help to identify unknown words.
2. students challenging each other's ideas in a positive way pertaining to comprehension. This should help to clarify thinking when

comprehending subject matter read.

3. higher levels of cognition are possible with learners discussing subject matter read in depth.

4. learners may assess their own individual contributions in developing a committee project pertaining to assessing comprehension involving a library book read. The quality of collaboration is then being evaluated.

5. students may develop standards for group work and assess the quality therein by using a five point Likert scale (Ediger, 1994, 31-32).

Peer assistance may be given when students have read different library books. Students might then work in pairs as in a dyad or with two other learners. The number involved needs to be kept low so that there are a plethora of learning opportunities for each to contribute within a committee setting. How might a dyad work when two learners work together with each having read a different library book?

1. teach each other word recognition techniques as needed. To understand something, one needs to be able to teach it.

2. teach higher levels of cognition by using rubrics as a guide.The rubric will have listed what the traits are for critical thinking, for example, to be in evidence. Peers then may evaluate if they truly are engaged in critical thinking.

3. teach each other about using multiple intelligence in using one's talents to reveal subject matter acquired through reading.

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